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Open access publishing in an African context: Notable improvements and recurring challenges

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Abstract

Open access publishing has been promoted as a pivotal means of bridging the gap in knowledge access and usage. Despite the growing support for open access publishing globally, little is known about African scholars' engagement with open access publishing and the barriers limiting their open access publishing practices. Using a survey research design, data was collected from 241 researchers from selected universities in Africa, such as Nigerian, Kenyan and South African universities. The data was collected using online surveys and analysed using the descriptive statistics of frequency counts and percentages. The study reveals that while most of the respondents had published open access articles (78.01%) and had a positive perception of the quality of open access journals (73.45%) and editorial teams, more than half were still limited by article processing charges (58.51%) as they had no funding for their research. Although African researchers are embracing open access publishing more now than they were historically, barriers such as article processing charges and the prolonged response time from reviewers continue to pose a serious challenge to open access uptake in Africa. This study proposes five recommendations for improving open access uptake in African and Global South countries.

Keywords

Open access publishing, OA, article processing charges, gold open access publishing, African countries, African researchers

Introduction

Open access (OA) publishing, a pivotal means of disseminating research findings, holds significant potential for African scholars. The OA initiative started in 2002 when the Budapest Open Access Initiative brought together a diverse group of stakeholders and launched a global campaign to make all new peer-reviewed research OA (Anglada and Abadal, 2023; Nazim et al., 2023). Unlike subscription-based scholarly publishing, which requires payment prior to access, OA publishing helps to break down paywall barriers (Matheka et al., 2014) and bridge the access gap for improved access and usage (Mncube, 2024; Vitalis et al., 2025). Furthermore, OA promotes transparency, competitiveness and efficiency, which can lead to overall cost reduction in scholarly publishing (Bertram et al., 2023). However, despite the impact of OA publishing on the liberalization of scholarly publishing, research has shown that some researchers are reluctant to embrace it fully (Rowley et al., 2017), and certain factors hinder them from fully utilizing OA publishing for research dissemination (Greussing et al., 2020).

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Factors such as article processing charges (APCs), knowledge of OA publishing and the composition of journal editorial teams may influence researchers' OA publishing practices. With the payment of APCs, publishers require authors, instead of readers, to bear the costs of publication (Alonso-Álvarez et al., 2024; Borrego, 2023), thereby increasing the financial burden on researchers with limited resources. These factors may pose significant challenges to researchers' OA publishing in Global South countries, especially Africa. This is because African researchers are often lacking publication funding from their respective institutions (Bezeng et al., 2025; Gigerenzer et al., 2025), and their universities are economically disadvantaged in offsetting the cost of publishing in gold OA journals (Awasthi et al., 2025) or financing transformative agreements to publish in hybrid journals (Steinberg, 2025). As such, it is imperative to investigate the factors limiting the OA publishing of African researchers, their knowledge of gold OA – a model of publishing typically funded by APCs and paid for by authors of accepted and published articles – and how these factors impede their OA publishing practices.

One of the widely discussed outcomes of the APC model of OA publishing is that it entrenches inequities among researchers. For instance, Frank et al. (2023: 3) highlight the inequities that the APC model presents 'for junior or unfunded researchers, and academics from resource-poor environments, for whom an increasing body of evidence shows clear evidence of discrimination and injustice'. In a recent study, Ayeni (2023: 523) attributed the 'causes of inequity in OA publishing among humanities and social science researchers in Canada to [the] unaffordable cost of APCs, unequal privileges, and gender disparities'. Sivertsen and Zhang (2022) also expressed that while OA is intended to make scientific literature more accessible, OA publishing fees deter researchers in the Global South from carrying out their research. Similarly, adequate and proper knowledge of OA publishing is crucial, as some researchers perceive OA publishing to be more cost-effective for the academic research community than the subscription-based model in the long term (Jung, 2025: 57–64). However, there are OA models that do not require the payment of APCs and are entirely free to publish and read, referred to as diamond OA (Da Silva, 2024; Holley, 2018). Without adequate knowledge of diamond OA, researchers tend to believe that OA publishing is generally expensive and unaffordable (Rafols et al., 2024).

Notably, the composition of journal editorial teams can play a significant role in researchers' adoption of OA publishing. Existing research has found that when a journal's editorial team is composed of a homogeneous set of demanding editors, the journal will publish many high-quality articles (Jerke et al., 2025; Kousha and Thelwall, 2024). Conversely, when there is a high number of less demanding editors, the journal will attract fewer submissions and publish a small number of articles that are potentially of lower quality (Jamali and Wakeling, 2025).

A number of researchers in various geographical locations have been addressing issues and innovations related to OA. A study conducted in Germany revealed that there are two main initiatives to promote OA: (1) transformative agreements, which have shown a clear increase in OA publications, and (2) support from providers of scholarly publishing platforms, which often adopt a diamond OA model (Arning, 2025: 65). In the Philippines, there is a growing body of literature on OA publishing and institutional repositories that emphasizes more equitable research access and dissemination practices (e.g. Cruz et al., 2025). Cruz et al.'s (2025) study highlights the potential of utilizing integrated platforms to promote and enhance OA publishing in the country. Meanwhile, in Australia, advocacy for OA aims to benefit the nation as a whole, with various programmes related to higher education that align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Missingham, 2025).

Although there have been several studies on OA in Africa, challenges persist. These include insufficient educational support for librarians and inadequate technological infrastructure to support OA (Fox and Hanlon, 2015). Nevertheless, OA promotes scholarly communication and research dissemination (Czerniewicz and Goodier, 2014). Ezema and Onyancha (2017) argue that African governments, researchers and librarians need to implement sustainable mechanisms to enhance the global visibility of African research findings through OA. Still, in the African context, researchers are often experiencing a shortage of OA publishers, and it is not known or well articulated how researchers currently understand OA in their context. Hence, this study concurrently explores three related aspects: African researchers' knowledge of and engagement with OA publishing; African researchers' perceptions of APCs and gold OA publishing; and how the composition of journal editorial teams influences the OA publishing practices of researchers in selected countries in Africa. The study answers the following research questions:

1. What is African researchers' knowledge of and engagement with OA publishing?

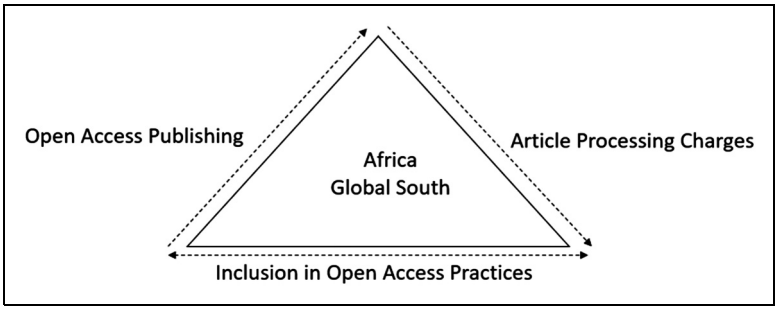

Figure 1. Status of OA in Africa.

2. How do African researchers perceive APCs and gold OA publishing?
3. How does the composition of journal editorial teams influence African researchers' OA publishing practices?

This examination of three distinct aspects of OA is based on the understanding that the OA phenomenon is widely researched in the African context. Additionally, the issues surrounding APCs are often overemphasized. Therefore, it is important to gain knowledge and insights on OA, along with the challenges associated with APCs. By doing so, the researchers assume that it will be possible to understand the current status of OA in Africa. This study uniquely addresses OA by focusing on three major aspects: OA publishing, APCs and inclusion in OA practices. In alignment with answering the research questions, this study proposes a new framework that can be used to uncover the status and issues of OA publishing within the African context. Figure 1 illustrates the possible aspects to consider when addressing OA in developing countries.

Literature review

The aim of this literature review is to identify what has been reported in the literature by African researchers and researchers from other parts of the world as factors impeding the growth of OA publishing in Africa. To do this, we searched the Web of Science core collections, Scopus, Library and Information Science Abstracts, African Journals Online and Google Scholar. We searched for keywords such as 'open access', 'open access publishing', 'open access uptake', 'barriers', 'challenges', 'impediments', 'limitations', 'Africa' and 'Global South countries'. Our review found a handful of relevant studies, which are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Research has shown that Africa's contribution to global research output remains exceedingly low (1.3%), with journal publications from Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya and Egypt accounting for a more significant percentage of the continent's output (Asubiaro and Onaolapo, 2023; Nabyonga-Orem et al., 2020; Uthman et al., 2015). While this paucity of research from African countries has been discussed extensively in the literature (Fonn et al., 2018; Kana et al., 2021; Uthman et al., 2015), this study focused on the factors limiting African researchers in publishing in gold OA outlets.

APCs remain one of the major stumbling blocks to African researchers' contribution to global OA research output (Amutuhaire, 2022; Beiter, 2024; Matheka et al., 2014). This may be attributed to poor funding systems, which make APCs prohibitively expensive for African scholars. African researchers are often poorly supported because they cannot afford partial waivers or discounted APCs when granted (Acharjee and Acharjee, 2024; Nabyonga-Orem et al., 2020). A decade ago, Olusegun et al. (2015) examined the factors determining journal choice among Nigerian medics and found that most Nigerian academics were unwilling to pay more than $300 for article publication fees. In a survey of the OA publishing practices of academic librarians in Nigeria, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (87.6%) agreed that APCs were a barrier to publishing in OA journals (Bosah et al., 2017).

Adjei and Owusu-Ansah (2016) explored the factors influencing Ghanaian researchers' journal selection decisions by studying 67 researchers drawn from several academic institutions in Ghana. Most of the researchers indicated a high preference for journals that did not charge APCs. In a similar survey on OA publishing adoption by early and mid-career researchers from five Kenyan universities, Chilimo et al. (2017) reported that 48.5% of the researchers had never paid APCs to publish their research OA, while the remaining respondents had paid an average of $172 to publish OA. Mekonnen et al. (2022) examined OA publishing in the ecology field in Africa and

reported that the average APC for journals was US $3150, but paying such an amount was difficult for African scholars.

Smith et al. (2022) assessed the effect of APCs on authors' geographical diversity using 37,000 articles from Elsevier's Mirror Journal system. They reported an absence of authors from Global South countries, with most OA articles written by authors in high-income countries. These findings indicate that APCs are a formidable barrier to OA publishing for researchers from the Global South, especially those in African countries. Although some journals offer author waivers, the waiver process remains complicated and opaque, making it difficult for African scholars to publish in OA journals (Mekonnen et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2022). Despite the availability of grants in some African countries, such as Nigeria (e.g. the Tertiary Education Trust Fund) and South Africa (e.g. National Research Foundation grants), these grants are competitive and may not be enough to cover APCs (Nabyonga-Orem et al., 2020).

Knowledge of OA publishing may also lead African researchers to engage in OA publishing. Bosah et al. (2017) examined the level of awareness of Nigerian academic librarians of OA publishing routes, and found that 90.8% and 80.6% were aware of the gold and green routes, respectively, while 74.6% indicated that they were not aware of diamond OA publishing. Burgman et al. (2019) expressed that gold OA publishing, where authors pay to publish, increases the advantages of those with resources over those without, thus promoting inequality in scholarly communication. While these studies reported on African scholars' engagement with OA publishing and the challenges posed by the prohibitive cost of APCs, they did not examine other factors that could account for their engagement in OA publishing. The current study seeks to fill this gap in the OA literature.

Methodology

This study employed a survey research design to collect empirical data on the OA publishing practices of researchers in some African countries. The study population comprises researchers from African universities, while purposive sampling was used to select respondents from Nigerian, Kenyan and South African universities. The rationale for choosing respondents from these countries is their status as research powerhouses of the western, eastern and southern African regions (Vieira and Cerdeira, 2022). The data was collected using a Web-based questionnaire. Halevi and Walsh's (2021) survey instruments were modified for the study to collect in-depth quantitative and qualitative data. Specifically, questions were developed on 'knowledge and experience of OA publishing' and 'perception of OA journals' by modifying Nobes and Harris's (2019) questions on researchers' attitudes towards OA journals and perception of OA journals. Additionally, the questions on 'payment of APCs in OA publishing' were developed using Halevi and Walsh's (2021) questions on funding and payments for OA publishing. The study framed the section on 'researchers' perceptions of APCs for OA publishing' using Halevi and Walsh's (2021) statements on faculty's perceptions of and opinions on APCs. The questions on 'editorial team composition on OA publishing' were developed with relevant open-ended questions to capture the views of the respondents. The email addresses of African researchers who had published in journals indexed in Scopus databases were extracted. Additionally, some researchers were contacted via the faculty mailing lists of their institutions. The online survey was deployed to 400 researchers in December 2023, and they were sent multiple reminders for completion. The survey was closed on 31 July 2024 with 241 responses, giving a 60.25% response rate. The survey data was analysed using the descriptive statistics of frequency count and percentages.

Findings

This section presents the findings from the study, including the demographic composition of the respondents along with their knowledge of and engagement in OA publishing. Table 1 provides an overview of the African countries, number of participants and universities that participated in the study.

Respondents' demographic information

A total of 241 respondents participated in the study. Of the respondents, 105 (43.57%) were from Nigeria, 101 (41.91%) were from South Africa and 35 (14.52%) were from Kenya. Regarding their academic qualifications, 101 (41.91%) had a Master's degree, followed by 86 (35.68%) with a PhD. Ninety-four respondents (39%) were from the social sciences, 65 (26.97%) were from the humanities, and 41 (17.01%) were from the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. In terms of their academic rank, more respondents were lecturers (31.54%), followed by professors (25.31%) and senior lecturers (18.26%). Figure 2 provides a graphic representation of the respondents' demographic information.

Table 1. Overview of participants' countries and universities.

Serial Number	Countries	Number of participants	Universities
1	Kenya	35	Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology
			Katarina University
			University of Nairobi
2	Nigeria	105	Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria
			Lead City University
			University of Ibadan
			University of Ilorin
			University of Lagos
3	South Africa	101	Durban University of Technology
			North-West University
			Stellenbosch University
			Tswane University of Technology
			University of Cape Town
			University of Fort Hare
			University of the Free State
			University of KwaZulu-Natal
			University of Limpopo
			University of Pretoria
			University of South Africa
			University of the Western Cape
			University of the Witwatersrand
			University of Zululand

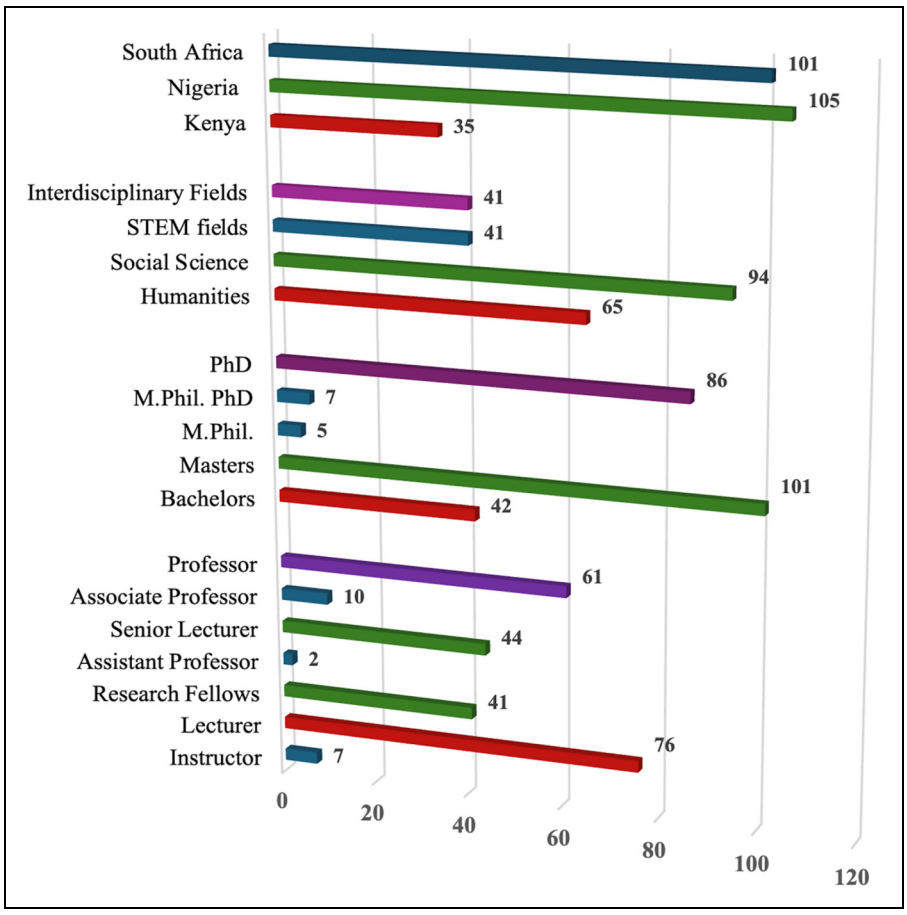

Figure 2. Demographic information of the respondents.

Table 2. Respondents' knowledge of OA publishing.

Serial Number	Items	Yes (%)	Undecided (%)	No (%)
1.	Have you published OA articles in the last few years?	79.67	2.49	17.84
2.	I understand the process of publishing my research articles via OA	78.01	5.39	16.59

Table 3. Respondents' frequency of OA publishing practices.

Serial Number	Item	Monthly (%)	Quarterly (%)	Twice a year (%)	Once a year (%)	Every two years (%)	Never (%)
1.	How often do you publish articles via OA?	1.66	9.12	32.78	18.67	12.03	25.72

Table 4. Respondents' perceptions of OA publishing.

Serial Number	Variables	Very good (%)	Good (%)	Undecided (%)	Average (%)	Poor (%)	Very poor (%)	Not applicable (%)
1.	Quality of editorial board and reviewers	22.41	42.74	7.05	16.18	1.24	0.83	9.54
2.	Quality of research	32.37	41.08	3.73	12.03	0.83	–	9.96
3.	Reliability	25.73	48.55	4.56	8.71	3.73	0.41	8.30
4.	Trustworthiness	26.56	49.79	4.98	8.71	2.07	–	7.88
5.	Reputation	26.14	51.87	4.56	7.05	2.90	0.83	6.64
6.	Response times to authors	26.56	34.44	11.20	13.69	2.90	1.66	9.54

Knowledge and experience of OA publishing

The respondents were asked if they had published in OA outlets in the previous few years. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, most of the respondents (79.67%) were familiar with the OA publishing process and had published their articles in OA outlets (78.01%). Regarding the frequency of their OA publishing practices, some respondents reported publishing once a year (18.67%) and some twice a year (32.78%). However, a significant number also reported that they had never published in OA outlets (25.72%). Notably, more than half of the respondents (55.6%) reported that they had some experience with OA publishing and it had been useful to their research, revealing an increasing uptake of OA publishing by African scholars.

Perceptions of OA journals

The survey participants were asked to indicate their perceptions of the OA journals they had published in using metrics such as quality of the editorial team, quality of the research, reliability of the journals, trustworthiness, reputation and response time to authors. As shown in Table 4, most of the respondents rated the quality of the research (73.45%) and editorial teams and reviewers (65.15%) in OA publishing as good or very good. They further rated the reliability (74.28%), trustworthiness (76.35%) and reputation (78.01%) of OA publishing as good or very good. However, only 61% of the respondents rated the review response times in OA journals as good or very good, which is lower than the other metrics. This suggests that most of the respondents had a positive perception of OA journals. Consequently, there is a need to improve the response time to authors in terms of peer-review outcomes and decisions.

Payment of APCs in OA publishing

To understand the respondents' engagement with OA publishing through the payment of APCs, they were asked to indicate how they paid for or funded their OA publishing. As shown in Tables 5 and 6, less than half of the respondents (45.64%) had paid APCs for OA articles in the previous three years, while a few respondents employed departmental funds (13.28%) and grant funding (16.18%) to pay

Table 5. APCs for OA publishing.

Serial Number	Items	Yes (%)	Undecided (%)	No (%)
1.	Have you paid APCs for OA articles in the last three years?	49.79	4.56	45.64
2.	Do you include or request anticipated APCs in your grant applications?	36.93	19.92	43.15

Table 6. Respondents' funding sources for OA publishing.

Serial Number	Items	Departmental funding (%)	Personal funds (%)	Grant funding (%)	Not applicable (%)	Other (%)
1.	How often do you publish articles via OA?	13.28	39	16.18	28.22	3.32
		Public funding (%)	Private funding (%)		No funding	
2.	What has been your primary publication funding source in the last three years?	22.41	19.09		58.51	

Table 7. Respondents' perceptions of APCs for OA publishing.

Serial Number	Items	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Undecided (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
1.	APCs are necessary to maintain OA publications	29.88	31.95	10.37	11.62	16.18
2.	APCs for OA publishing are fair	12.03	24.90	18.67	18.26	26.14
3.	APCs are too expensive and they discourage me from considering OA publishing	34.02	25.31	22.41	12.45	5.81
4.	APCs favour well-funded researchers	41.91	35.68	10.37	9.96	2.07
5.	Authors should not pay APCs for OA publishing	28.22	26.14	21.16	21.99	2.49
6.	APCs for OA should be paid by funders	31.95	34.85	19.09	13.69	0.41
7.	Institutions should pay APCs for OA publishing	38.17	43.57	9.54	7.05	1.66
8.	APCs limit my OA publishing practices	27.80	35.68	10.37	24.48	1.66

for APCs. Although 43.15% of the respondents included APCs in their grant applications, nearly 37% did not include APCs in their applications. The findings show that some respondents had access to public funding (22.41%) and others relied on private or self-funding (19.09%), while most had had no funding source (58.51%) for their research in the last three years. As such, they relied on personal funds for their research.

Perceptions of APCs for OA publishing

The respondents were asked to indicate their perceptions of the need for APCs in OA publishing. Their responses were rated using a Likert scale (*strongly agree*, *agree*, *undecided*, *disagree*, *strongly disagree*). As shown in Table 7, 61.83% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that APCs are necessary to maintain OA publications. However, 44.40% of the respondents did not agree that paying APCs for OA publishing is fair, while 18.67% were undecided. Most of the respondents believed that APCs are too expensive (59.33%) and favour well-funded researchers (77.59%), and that authors should not pay APCs for OA publishing (54.36%). They expressed that funding agencies (66.8%) or tertiary institutions (81.74%) should pay the APCs needed to publish in OA outlets. Overall, a large percentage of the

Table 8. Respondents' perceptions of editorial team composition for OA publishing.

Serial Number	Items	Strongly agree/ Agree (%)	Undecided (%)	Strongly disagree/ Disagree (%)
1.	I consider the editorial composition of OA journals before submitting my manuscripts to such journals	74.69	13.69	11.61
2.	I consider the academic qualifications of OA journal editorial teams before submitting my manuscripts to such journals	68.05	17.43	14.52
3.	I consider the research interests of OA journal editorial teams before submitting my manuscripts to such journals	65.56	8.71	25.73
4.	I consider the institutional affiliations of OA journal editorial teams before submitting my manuscripts to such journals	62.66	13.69	23.65
5.	I consider the nationalities of OA journal editorial teams before submitting my manuscripts to such journals	42.32	11.20	46.47
6.	Editorial teams hinder me from publishing my manuscripts in OA journals	31.12	19.92	48.96
7.	Editorial teams complicate the peer-review process for OA publishing	30.71	23.24	46.06
8.	Editorial teams delay OA publishing through the peer-review process and other roles	44.81	21.58	33.61
9.	Editorial teams add value to OA publishing	82.99	10.37	6.64
10.	I receive valuable feedback on my articles from OA journal editorial teams	78.43	15.77	5.80

respondents (63.49%) agreed that APCs limit their OA publishing practices.

Some respondents provided additional comments on their experiences with APCs for OA publishing. Despite acknowledging the role of OA publishing in liberalizing scholarly communication, the respondents stated that APCs increase inequity in OA publishing. One respondent expressed that 'having fixed APCs for all research is unfair to researchers from the Global South, given the limited financial resources, paucity of funding and the prevailing socio-economic conditions in their countries'. Although some OA journals offer waivers for researchers from the Global South, the respondents believed that 'priority should be given to prolific African researchers who continuously contribute to global research'.

Editorial team composition in OA publishing

The respondents were asked to indicate their perceptions of the editorial composition of OA journals using a Likert scale (*strongly agree*, *agree*, *undecided*, *disagree*, *strongly disagree*). As shown in Table 8, they considered the different qualities of editorial teams before submitting their manuscripts to OA journals. Notably, most of the respondents (74.69%) considered the composition of the editorial teams of OA journals before submitting their manuscripts to such journals. More than half of the respondents indicated that they considered the academic qualifications (68.05%), research interests (65.56%) and institutional affiliations (62.66%) of OA journals' editorial team members before submitting their manuscripts for publication. The nationalities of editorial team members had a lesser impact on the researchers' decision to publish in OA journals, at 42.32%. Although some respondents stated that editorial teams delay OA publishing (44.81%) and complicate the peer-review process (30.71%), a vast majority believed that editorial teams add value to OA publishing (82.99%) and that they received valuable feedback on their submitted manuscripts (78.43%).

The respondents provided additional comments on the qualities of the editorial teams they evaluated prior to their article submissions. The findings show that the transparency and responsiveness of editorial teams in the peer-review process had the most significant impact on their decision to publish in OA journals. This is because the respondents tended to favour journals with clear feedback, a reasonable response time from editors and a quick publication time. Some of the respondents reported often checking whether the editorial teams aligned with diversity and inclusion principles and promoted epistemic equity before

submitting their articles for publication in such journals. Notably, some respondents chose OA journals based on their impact factors and inclusion in research indexing databases such as Scopus, Web of Science and CrossRef prior to submitting their manuscripts. Lastly, the decision to publish in OA journals by some researchers depended on the acceptability, geographical coverage and visibility of their research to the journal's broader audience.

Further, we asked the respondents about their general opinion on the editorial composition of OA journals in their disciplines. They expressed that the editorial teams of OA journals should comprise individuals with 'diverse expertise, especially if the discipline is multifaceted'. Also, editorial teams should be 'composed of qualified researchers who cover all areas of disciplines with an emphasis on gender, racial and geographical diversity'. The composition of editorial teams in such a manner will lead to OA journals that communicate innovative and diverse research findings beyond the scope of traditional journals. Recalling their experiences with their recent manuscript submissions, the respondents explained that despite facing delays in getting feedback from editorial teams, they received thorough and constructive reviews and experienced good communication whenever they asked questions. This suggests that editorial teams add value to OA publishing by ensuring that manuscripts go through a rigorous peer-review process to meet the required standards. Overall, the respondents believed that the editorial teams of OA journals help to share knowledge by working closely with authors and publishers to ensure the creation of high-quality OA publications.

Challenges limiting OA publishing by African scholars

The respondents expressed their views on the challenges hindering their OA publishing practices. Out of all the challenges indicated, APCs remained the most significant challenge to OA publishing for the researchers. More than half of the respondents who had no funding sources and relied on private funds for their research shared this view. The respondents emphasized that APCs in US dollars, euros or pounds sterling are prohibitively expensive for researchers in the Global South, especially Africa. The high cost of APCs is made worse by the unclear nature of waivers and discounts, as well as the paucity of funding sources for researchers from these countries. The prolonged response time from reviewers also serves as a challenge to OA publishing, as most researchers prefer timely feedback to enable them to use their published articles for tenure and promotion purposes. The lack of diversity in editorial teams, which is exemplified by the paucity of Global South researchers on editorial boards, makes many OA journals 'overly western', discouraging some African researchers from actively publishing in them.

Discussion

African researchers' OA knowledge

The findings from this study reveal that the African researchers from the three countries represented are familiar with OA publishing and have published some of their articles via this medium. Although the majority of the researchers are from the social sciences and humanities fields with higher academic qualifications, there is a shortage of OA journals in the African context. However, African scholars are knowledgeable of OA procedures and the significance of OA publishing. The African researchers chose OA journals due to factors such as high visibility, high impact, inclusion in research indexing databases, geographical coverage and rapid publication times. This finding supports existing research, which shows that academics consider higher visibility, high impact factors, wider circulation and faster publication times as motivations for publishing in OA journals (Ili, 2025; Kousha and Thelwall, 2024; Rowley et al., 2017; Sheikh, 2017). This encourages global scholars to come together and promote OA practices that favour global scholarship for knowledge sharing. This is confirmed by Nazim and Bhardwaj (2023), as they assert that OA publishing in European countries, including OA journals, digital repositories, research output, mandates and policies for publicly funded research, should promote OA adoption among researchers worldwide.

While the study's respondents rated the quality of the research, editorial teams, reviewers and reputation of OA publishing as good or very good, the response time for reviews had the lowest rating. The low rating for response time corroborates the findings of Huisman and Smits (2017), who reported the frustration of authors who waited over six months without hearing anything from journal editorial teams or receiving responses to information requests. Delayed reviewer response times impede the OA publishing of African researchers, as these researchers prefer timely feedback to enable them to use their published articles for appointment and promotion purposes. This finding also gives credence to the work of Taşkın et al. (2022), which states that papers with authors from central countries and high-income countries and with a co-author from a high-income country have the advantage of shorter review and publication times.

African researchers' perceptions of APCs

The findings show that most African researchers rely on personal funds to pay for APCs as they do not receive funding for their research. Due to the limited number of OA journals, African scholars opt for Global North OA journals. Global North OA journals often impose barriers on African scholars by requiring costly APCs, limiting their ability to publish freely. The paucity of funds for these researchers was confirmed by research carried out in 2018, which showed that countries in the World Health Organization's African Region received only 0.65% of global research grants (Nabyonga-Orem et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2018). APC payment in US dollars, euros or pounds sterling equivalent remains the most significant challenge to African researchers' OA publishing. This significant cost increases the inequity in OA publishing and continues to affect African scholars. OA publishing, as one of the methods used by journals and publishers to mitigate inequity in access to information, is crucial for the advancement of scientific frontiers (Esene et al., 2025). However, the costs of processing submissions and publications now fall on Global South researchers because APCs are prohibitive, hindering the publication of relevant research (Saloojee and Pettifor, 2024).

Existing studies found that publishers do not sufficiently justify the high cost of APCs and may prevent authors from fully adopting OA publishing (Alonso-Álvarez et al., 2024; Graziotin et al., 2014; O'Hanlon et al., 2020). The high cost of APCs and lack of funding for research often lead to inequalities in research contributions, as African academics are forced to 'choose' between contributing to regional knowledge ecosystems or seeking the 'recognition' provided by indexed European and US journals (Asubiaro et al., 2024). The current system of APCs for gold OA increases the complexities of OA publishing for budding researchers. Although there have been several global initiatives to address this inequity, particularly via offering APC waivers to researchers from low- and middle-income countries (Rodrigues et al., 2022; Ware and Mabe, 2015), the respondents expressed that 'priority should be given to prolific African researchers who continuously contribute to global research'.

Inclusivity in OA publishing practices

The findings show that editorial teams add value to OA publishing by sharing knowledge through the review process and working closely with authors and publishers to ensure the creation of high-quality publications. Therefore, it is essential for OA journals to consider inclusive and collaborative approaches when journal editorial boards, reviewers and advisors are selected or recruited from different geographical locations of the world. The findings reveal that the lack of diversity among editorial board members, which is exemplified by the dearth of Global South researchers in editorial teams, makes many OA journals 'overly western', and this could discourage Global South scholars from publishing in OA outlets. The 'westernized' nature of journal editorial teams was reported in previous studies involving medical research (Patel et al., 2021), editors of the Association of College and Research Libraries (Ford et al., 2017), and Wiley publishers (Ricci, 2021). Consequently, some African researchers often check whether editorial teams align with equity, diversity and inclusion principles and promote epistemic diversity before submitting their manuscripts for publication. The results further express that the editorial boards of OA journals should comprise qualified scholars with diverse backgrounds and expertise, given the multifaceted nature of some disciplines and the myriad needs of the global academic community. Having a diverse editorial board with balanced representation can add new and valuable perspectives to OA journals because some issues and knowledge gaps in certain regions are known only by local researchers (Trueblood et al., 2025). The respondents believed that the composition of editorial teams in this regard would result in OA journals that communicate innovative and diverse research findings beyond the scope of traditional journals.

The study's findings have implications for African academic libraries and librarianship in general. First, the findings add to the growing body of literature on the challenges posed by APC payment to the growth of OA publishing. The findings underscore the prevalence of APCs as a major barrier to the scholarly contributions of researchers from low-income countries, and the need for African academic libraries and universities to address this challenge by adopting innovative measures to support the publishing activities of their researchers. Transformative agreements, also known as publish-and-read agreements, are a publishing model that holds enormous promise for African researchers in this regard. Despite the criticism surrounding the sustainability of this model (Farley et al., 2021), transformative agreements could serve as a viable means of increasing the OA publishing of African researchers if negotiated properly. The latest data from the efficiency and standards for article charges (ESAC) Transformative Agreement

Registry reveals the low participation of African academic libraries and consortia in transformative agreements. Consequently, African universities should negotiate viable transformative agreement deals with publishers to enhance the OA publishing practices of their researchers.

Furthermore, the over-reliance on gold OA publishing by African researchers, as noted in this study, is a major concern. Given the limited financial resources and research funding available to researchers from African countries, diamond and green OA outlets could serve as sustainable alternatives for these scholars. Diamond OA publishing and green OA publishing are essential OA models that do not involve the payment of APCs and could increase the scholarly output of researchers if utilized properly. African academic libraries and universities could advocate for the increased use of diamond OA publishing by researchers and recognize its qualities for promotion and evaluation purposes in the same manner as gold OA publishing.

The challenges to OA publishing established in this study limit African researchers' contribution to global knowledge and are among the factors responsible for the low representation of diverse views and voices in libraries. Librarianship has long been criticized as a westernized and White-dominated profession that prioritizes the views of dominant groups ahead of marginalized groups, and this is evident in library staff, collections and services (Brook et al., 2015; Warner, 2001). Price (2022: 97) also commented on the skewed nature of library collections by stating that much of the content in academic libraries is written by and about Whites only, and this culture of Whiteness impacts collection-building. By addressing the challenges to OA publishing, the representation of marginalized groups, especially from Global South countries, could be improved in librarianship.

The inequality of access to scholarly articles posed by paywalls has been discussed in the literature (Bosman and Kramer, 2018; Boudry et al., 2019; Piwowar et al., 2018). Due to the cost of paywalled articles, readers, especially those in low-income countries, are often at a disadvantage (Himmelstein et al., 2018) and forced to rely on colleagues in developed countries for access to or the use of the OA resources at their disposal. The findings of this study could help address the challenges to OA publishing and subsequently increase the volume of scholarly articles available to these disadvantaged readers. Societies require access to research in the process of scientific inquiry and to address economic, environmental and social development issues (Ondari-Okemwa, 2007). They also require access to research in their transition towards a knowledge-based economy, the massification of higher education, and the integration and assimilation of information technology into the academic environment (Mutula, 2009). This study provides recommendations on how to improve OA publishing, as well as how to enhance access to research in African countries.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study examined the OA publishing practices of researchers in Global South countries using only a quantitative approach. Opting for a mixed-methods approach would have been appropriate in engaging with researchers for an in-depth investigation of OA issues in Africa. However, due to resource and time constraints, the researchers were unable to conduct interviews with the study participants. It is recommended that other scholars consider a qualitative approach in studying this phenomenon. Also, focusing only on universities in three African countries (Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa) is a limitation given the number of universities in African countries and regions in Global South countries. Future research should explore the OA publishing practices of researchers in other African countries and Global South regions. Lastly, the study was limited to factors hindering OA publishing with a specific focus on the gold OA model. Subsequent studies should examine researchers' engagement with and the barriers to other OA models, such as diamond and green OA publishing.

Conclusion

In this study, the investigation concerned African researchers' knowledge of and engagement with OA publishing, their perceptions of gold OA publishing, and how the composition of journal editorial teams influences the OA publishing practices of researchers. While most of the researchers surveyed in this study had published in OA outlets, the frequency of such publishing was still low. The results show that an overwhelming majority of the researchers had no funding to publish their research in OA outlets, particularly in journals using the gold OA model. It is interesting to note that most of the respondents perceived the quality of research, editorial teams and reviewers of OA journals positively. However, they lamented the unaffordability of APCs in gold OA journals, especially because they were not usually funded to pay APCs. This stresses the inequity caused by APCs in OA publishing, which has disproportionately limited scientific contributions from Global South

countries. While African researchers are not entirely against paying APCs, they strongly believe that funding agencies should cover the cost, and that OA journals should do more than grant limited waivers to researchers from the Global South.

Moreover, a growing concern about the poor diversity of the editorial team composition of OA journals was noted. The African researchers indicated that they often considered the institutional affiliations, research interests and academic qualifications of editorial teams before submitting their research. They also revealed that their decision to submit articles to OA journals depended on the acceptability, geographical coverage and visibility of their research to the broader audience through the journal. This stresses the need to improve equity, diversity and inclusion in the editorial composition of OA journals. The lack of diversity in the editorial teams of OA journals, exemplified by the dearth of Global South researchers on editorial boards, could discourage African researchers from publishing in OA outlets. As African researchers are embracing OA publishing more now than they were historically, there is a need to encourage them by promoting the diamond OA model. With diamond OA, no researcher will be excluded from publishing their work in OA journals based on cost. As such, there is a need for more concerted efforts to promote and fund diamond OA journals as a way of improving the uptake of OA publishing by researchers in the Global South.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study and other existing studies, the following recommendations are made:

- Africa needs access to scholarly content to generate new knowledge that provides solutions at an exponential rate to local challenges. Hence, there is a growing reliance on freely accessible scholarly content as well as free and open channels for the dissemination of scholarly information generated from the Global South (Raju and Badrudeen, 2022). As such, it should be economically feasible for large publishing houses to waive APCs for the group defined by the United Nations as 'least developed countries' (Taubert et al., 2021), many of which are in Africa.
- There should be the increased practice of APC waivers for OA publishing, especially for African researchers in journals that cannot practise diamond OA. Edem et al. (2021) advocate that journals should include an additional eligibility criterion for APC waivers, such as for early career researchers without external funding, to ensure that the dissemination of good-quality research is not determined by the ability to pay. APC waivers could significantly enhance the publication of research conducted in low-income countries, such as those in Africa. It is imperative that real steps are taken towards supporting authors from developing countries, which could be achieved by increasing the number of journals offering waivers and encouraging international and local health organizations to provide financial support (Abdul Baki and Alhaj-Hussein, 2021).
- The editorial teams of OA journals should comprise individuals with diverse expertise, especially if the discipline is multifaceted. Also, editorial teams should be composed of qualified researchers who cover all areas of the discipline, with an emphasis on gender, racial and geographical diversity.
- OA journal editorial teams should include members who are strong advocates for OA publishing. Their advocacy could help raise awareness about the benefits of OA and encourage researchers to embrace OA principles, consequently promoting the wider dissemination of knowledge.
- Editorial teams should be liberalized to increase diversity and representation from marginalized communities, especially researchers from the Global South. There should be an open process for those interested in joining editorial teams and 'priority should be given to prolific African researchers who continuously contribute to global research'.

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